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ABSTRACT

America's more than 1,200 community, technical, and junior colleges constitute the largest branch of higher education in the country. Two-year colleges are subjected to rigorous institutional accreditation standards and procedures by regional accrediting bodies. At least 80% of their students are already in the workforce, and they serve the majority of women and persons of color pursuing higher education today. The employer community increasingly requests broadly educated new employees adaptable to the rapid changes of the workplace. In 1988, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) identified the fundamental educational standards necessary for the U.S. workforce to be competitive. These standards would require that American workers have the following skills: (1) knowing how to learn; (2) competence in reading, writing, and computation; (3) listening and oral communication skills; (4) creative thinking and problem solving; (5) self-esteem, goal-setting, and career development; (6) interpersonal skills; and (7) organizational effectiveness and leadership. These skills should be the underpinning of a broad based, flexible, and voluntary system of standards, perhaps modeled on the Defense Department-sponsored Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, that would permit greater transferability of credits for an increasingly mobile workforce. Today, many industries already require the Associate Degree as the basis for employment. To make community colleges the presumptive deliverer of workforce development would simply affirm what is already happening in most states. (JSP)

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SKILL STANDARDS AND CERTIFICATION ISSUES

Prepared Statement

of

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to the

Department of Labor

Department of Education

and

National Advisory Commission on Work-Based Learning

on behalf of the

American Association of Community and Junior Colleges

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Today, the more than 1200 community, technical, and junior colleges constitute the largest branch of American higher education. They enroll over 8 million credit students and another 5 million non-credit students. They serve more than half the nation's freshmen. The average age of a community college student is 29. At least 80 percent of these students are already in the workforce as either part-time workers and full-time students or the reverse. The parking lots are typically as full in the evening as morning, accentuating the fact that the colleges are a critical provider of career mobility for a substantial number of working adults. Community colleges also serve the majority of women and persons of color pursuing higher education today. With the expectation that the majority of new entrants to the labor market will be individuals from these groups, the nation's community colleges will be even more important in preparing our future workforce because of their commitment to institutional accessibility.

Degree-granting two-year colleges traditionally submit to rigorous institutional accreditation standards and procedures from the regional accrediting bodies. The accreditation process is both a regular and thorough examination of the program integrity across the institution. Failure to meet standards would mean that an institution could not obtain accreditation or could lose accreditation. This possibility is a serious matter

in terms of student recruitment, credibility with industrial and business clients and the attraction of outside financial support.

However, once this obstacle has been cleared, community colleges have historically built their local reputations on an ability to provide discrete levels of quality in their three primary service areas. In their transfer function, the colleges have had to ensure the quality and scope of their curricula and coursework to upper level colleges and universities. It is a simple market economy. Colleges will find it increasingly difficult to compete if their coursework won't transfer.

In the area of "for credit" occupational curricula the colleges are again driven by market considerations. Curricula and coursework are offered only when there is significant demand. Even then, in order to enhance programmatic success, the colleges form local employer advisory committees to guide coursework. These advisory committees are continued in order to provide suggestions that keep coursework current. Employers are not eager to hire our graduates if they find the product deficient.

The third area of community college service, continuing education and customized training, is perhaps still more sensitive to market considerations and customer satisfaction. In these cases, the colleges usually offer non-credit instruction upon the request of the community or employers. Again, effectiveness can be gauged by the readiness of the customer to return for additional services.

The community college's programs are also accredited by various professionals or industry organizations such as the National League for Nursing, the American Institute for Banking, or the Ford Motor Company's asset program. Thus, a voluntary national network already exists which establishes standards for professional and technical education.

In short, the nation's community colleges have a successful history in responding to the diverse needs of their communities. The consistency of the community college enrollment trends suggests satisfaction with the product. This is especially remarkable given the decline of the number of college-age students--a reflection of persistently low birth rates in the 1960s and the 1970s. Thus, the colleges have continued to grow in the face of adverse trend lines. It is clear that their growth can be explained in large measure by the strong attraction of the colleges to young adults in the workplace. Therefore, the colleges are increasingly seen as a wellspring of career transitions.

A service that is rapidly expanding within the national system of community colleges is assisting local employers, particularly small business, with the analysis and projections of their employment and training needs. So many smaller firms simply are not staffed and cannot afford the specialized staffing to do this level of planning. What has become clear from these efforts is that business doesn't always know what it wants or

needs and is often hesitant to move aggressively into new technologies and new skills. As a result, community colleges have begun utilizing techniques, such as DACUM, "Developing A Curriculum," to assist individual as well as collective businesses to focus on their employee skill needs and education programs, helping them establish the standards they need to be competitive.

America's community colleges have achieved this remarkable record by listening and responding to the educational and training requirements of their communities. The colleges have not and do not now shrink from the changing dynamics of society, the economy, and the workplace. They appreciate that we are now part of a global economy and that survival is contingent upon a globally competitive workforce. To them, to us, this challenge means shouldering a still larger responsibility for building a world class workforce.

Even so, the colleges would urge caution as the Department of Education and Department of Labor embark on this ambitious task. It is our substantial involvement with the nation's business community that suggests that there are many pitfalls ahead--if we aren't careful, things could be made worse. For example, we suspect that defining an industry will lead to the discovery of many discrete occupational families nesting within a single industry. Furthermore, the technical requirements of an industry will likely shift as one moves across an industry. For

example, technician education would differ for a production worker at Motorola and a Motorola repair technician.

Our experience in customized training and educational advisory panels warns us that the needs of major employers and small business employers can vary substantially. This latter consideration is no small matter, since small business is the largest employer. Moreover, the educational/training requirements typically vary within a plant from CEO, to plant manager, to foreman, to workers on the line.

This is not to suggest that we see this mountain as too high to climb. Yet the climb will be tricky. Our colleges constantly face this challenge at the local level. In the attempt to define whole industries by their discrete skill requirements at the national level, government must take care not to over-define an industry. This is especially true in an era that is being driven by rapid technological advances and abundant amounts of information. The occupational department heads in our colleges tell us that their employer community increasingly requests broadly educated new hires adaptable to the rapid changes of the workplace. The new breed technician must be well grounded in basic principles, and flexible enough to adjust to the constant challenge of emerging technology. Employers indicate to college personnel that short-term customized training is often needed to acclimate workers to new technology changes. However, such training presents obstacles if the basic skills are missing.

This leads to one of our deeper concerns about this process. The background information in the Federal Register announcing these hearings had a disturbing tendency to blur the differences between training and education. Both of these processes are important learning strategies, but they may differ in their assumptions and their goals. Significant skill changes usually require a strong education base. When significant changes occur in a job technology, (such as moving from a slide rule to CADCAM or from a carburetor to computerized fuel systems), rigorous education is essential. If we are to seek skill standards, the educational component must be exactly defined.

In 1988, the American Society for Training and Development published Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want, which identified the following minimal broad educational standards that are necessary for the U.S. to compete:

1. Knowing how to learn
2. Competence in reading, writing and computation
3. Communication: listening and oral communication
4. Adaptability: creative thinking and problem solving
5. Personal management: self esteem, goal setting/motivation and personal/career development
6. Group effectiveness: interpersonal skills, negotiation, teamwork
7. Influence: organizational effectiveness and leadership.

These are fundamental educational standards that must be

taught from the earliest possible time in school and reinforced throughout an individual's career. Competence in these seven areas will allow an individual to continuously learn new skills over time and help his/her company be competitive. These are the very foundations of education, which in turn permit successful training. Both are necessary and available through the community college.

Related to this issue is the amount of time the U.S. requires its students to participate in its educational system. Compared to other leading competitors, the U.S. emphasizes fewer years and shorter days, weeks, and months of education. Quietly, the community college has become the new U.S. standard for competency-based education. Now, our 14 years compare favorably with European and Asian education standards. We believe that the U.S. should seriously consider making 14 years of education the national standard as we enter the 21st century. However, the intellectual base and well articulated curricula of the community college has already moved the U.S. educational system toward this objective. Today, many industries require the Associate Degree as the basis for employment. Putting this another way, to make community colleges the presumptive deliverer of workforce development would simply affirm what is already happening in most states.

There are historic differences to be considered between funding sources for education and training. The former is

essentially a state preserve with attendant rules and regulations. While the national Job Training Partnership System is responsible for the lion's share of training, the states do support a surprising amount of economic development driven training. Thus, even in the training arena the state/federal lines bleed into one another. Under these circumstances, voluntary guidelines are essential. We believe that the two federal departments should find ways to actively encourage industries to voluntarily seek to standardize their baseline skills. The community colleges are very ready to respond. We would oppose the establishment of a national framework that goes beyond collecting and stimulating skill benchmarks. Community colleges resist the creation of additional, monolithic accrediting bodies. With some adjustment, the present framework will be sufficient.

The colleges recognize that adult students are increasingly mobile. Many students face mobility needs as great as the military faces. In these cases, conflicts in courses and standards result in lost credits and additional time in matriculation. Additionally, the same structure often frustrates industrial managers as they look for course consistency across state lines--such inconsistencies retard the use of the credit system for career ladder mobility for both employers and employees.

Community colleges suggest that the Defense

Department-sponsored Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) might present a useful model for employers and adult employees. SOC is a voluntary program that is open to four- and two-year institutions. SOC members submit to a number of student procedures that make the institution more user friendly to military personnel. Moreover, there is an agreement that if coursework congruity is 80% or more, credits will automatically transfer. Such a framework, at the national level, sponsored by the Departments of Education and Labor could open up the higher education system for our increasingly mobile workforce.

CONCLUSION

The nation's community colleges already provide the basis of a comprehensive national system for advanced workforce development through the Associate Degree. The components of the skills employers want should be the underpinning of a broad based, flexible, and voluntary system of standards that emphasizes education of the whole person, one who becomes capable of continuous learning through education and periodic training as technology and other competitive factors demand change in jobs and workplace skills.

The American Association of Community and junior Colleges, through its councils, such as the National Council of Advanced Technology Centers, and its network of member colleges, is

already meeting or exceeding current standards where they exist and helping industry establish standards locally where they don't exist or must be customized.

The community colleges have proven their accountability, credibility and leadership and are anxious to work with the Departments of Labor and Education and the National Advisory Commission on Work-Based Learning to respond to the President's call for a more competitive workforce.

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